

Red Alert

Antony Kaminju accompanies one of South Africa's notorious security companies on a morning raid

WORDS AND IMAGES BY ANTONY KAMINJU

In their bright red overalls and crimson helmets the employees of the Red Ants, a South African private security company, are unmistakable.

In the run up to the 2010 World Cup they were employed to remove illegal occupants from land adjacent to the stadiums in a bid to clean up the country's image for international visitors. But critics say they are state-hired mercenaries used to evict people without regard to their welfare.

It took months to get access to the firm but finally I am able to accompany them early one morning to a mining settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

The land had been taken over by immigrants, mainly from Mozambique and Zimbabwe. They built shacks in the area, which they assumed were their own. But the mining company, through a court order, has demanded they move out.

The Red Ants' arrival took the occupants by surprise. The strategy is to turn up early in the morning before the occupants have woken up. Armed with iron bars and heavy shoes they knocked and kicked on doors,

asking everyone to move their belongings as quickly as possible. Half-dressed family members struggled to gather whatever belongings they could. Then, within an hour, the shacks were levelled, leaving hundreds of families stranded with nowhere to go.

Although the Red Ants are always armed with crude weapons for self-protection, those evicted do not always leave peacefully. At times they stage strong resistance with the standoff sometimes lasting for hours. If the Red Ants are overwhelmed they normally call on the South African police for reinforcement.

After the demise of apartheid in 1994, the South African government inherited a serious housing shortage. More than 2 million families were left homeless. In trying to deal with this the government has also pledged to eradicate informal settlements by 2014.

The Red Ants, it would appear, are part of this plan.

Antony Kaminju is a Kenyan photographer based in Johannesburg. pmi-ea.com



Residents have little time to salvage belongings



Once the residents leave the shacks, the Red Ants set about dismantling the dwelling



The Red Ants arrive in the early morning to catch people unawares



In some cases angry crowds, held back by police, protest against the removals



What the residents salvage is left on the street waiting for the next move